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Oregon OSHA cites Precision Castparts for two violations tied to release of toxic cloud in May

Published: Wednesday, October 19, 2011, 11:34 AM Updated: Wednesday, October 19, 2011, 3:38 PM



By Scott Learn, The Oregonian
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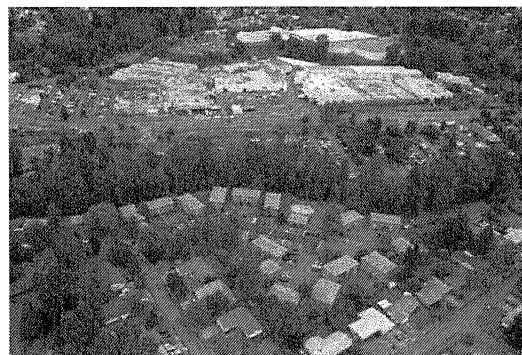
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Randy L Rasmussen, The Oregonian

Precision Castparts Corp. has operated plants along Johnson Creek Boulevard for more than 50 years, with neighborhoods growing around it.

Oregon OSHA has cited **Precision Castparts** for two "serious" violations related to **release of a potentially toxic cloud** from its southeast Portland manufacturing plant in May.

The agency proposed a total penalty of only \$600, at the low end of the penalty scale, noting that the incident was the company's first off-site toxic air release in its 50-year-plus history at the huge plant along Johnson Creek Boulevard.

After a power drop that started the incident, two electricians went into the "hot zone" without any respiratory protection, the **citation** says.

The electricians and a millwright who went into the room with firefighters also did not have the proper hazardous

response training, Oregon OSHA alleged in the citation, issued last week and released today.

The reduced power load at the plant, the result of nearby **Portland General Electric** work, cut power to a crane that was due to lift a 519-pound titanium part from a diluted acid bath. The power loss also cut power to a scrubber system that captures hazardous chemicals formed during the bath.

The plume escaped out the roof, and firefighters ordered neighbors in nearby homes to shelter in place. No injuries were reported.

Oregon OSHA, which regulates workplace safety, also said the company should more clearly mark off hazard zones where employees shouldn't go in an emergency. During the May incident, a firefighter found a worker in a "smoke shack" within a potentially hazardous area.

Other recommendations:

* The company should move electrical controls outside the chemical mill area so workers won't have to enter potentially hazardous areas to reset or shut off equipment or switch power supplies.

* The company should train personnel to respond to hazardous releases, instead of relying on "a simple evacuation." Firefighters aren't likely to know which switches, valves and connections must be adjusted to deal with a release, the agency said.

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Portland-based Precision Castparts Corp. is one of two Oregon-based Fortune 500 companies, along with Nike. Among other business lines, it casts huge parts for jet engines and the military, including components for howitzers.

Since 2008, **Oregon OSHA has twice raised significant safety concerns at the large parts campus.**

The company can appeal the violations. Spokesman Dwight Weber said today that it's premature to comment in detail because the company hasn't officially received the OSHA report.

"We had a positive closing conference with OSHA regarding the incident," he wrote in an email, "and we take OSHA comments seriously."

Weber said the company has taken "several preventative measures" as a result of discussions with OSHA, but did not provide details.

This summer Precision officials said the company made improvements after the May incident, including moving the equipment controls out of the chemical mill where the incident occurred. The company also promptly corrected problems raised in previous citations, they said.

Oregon OSHA has the nation's highest workplace inspection rate, but has long had among the lowest penalties in the nation.

In 2010, Oregon had the second-lowest average penalty — at \$305 — for severe violations that could result in death or serious injury, **according to an AFL-CIO compilation of federal data.** The national average was \$972 per violation.

Prompted by a federal OSHA review, Oregon OSHA is **considering restructuring penalties** to "enhance the deterrent effect," with possible increases in base penalty rates and bigger increases for large employers.

Melanie Mesaros, spokeswoman for Oregon OSHA, said the agency plans hearings on the possible changes in December.

"We inspect more businesses than just about any other state in the country," she said. "We feel like in order to get better compliance that's working for us."

-- **Scott Learn**

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There is no good excuse for such a dangerous situation to be caused by the grid going down. Precision Castparts was playing with worker and neighborhood lives.

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**oopslogic**

October 20, 2011 at 11:59AM

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No, there are reasons, not excuses. Keep going and we will see them leave the area (like virtually every other large company). My company closed and moved to Mississippi because of the assinine regulations, EPA and high costs of doing business in this area. PCP is a great company that brings prosperity to our community. The author's editorializing is pathetic...typical of the Snoregonian. Ignorance rules, but at least it is PC.

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**madcarpenter**

October 19, 2011 at 3:02PM

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Although this was Precision's first such transgression in 50+ years, you can't help but recognize the similarities between, and potential for a Bhopal, India, or Fukushima, Japan disaster scenario. What if this power outage had been the result of a massive earthquake, and could not be restored quickly or easily?

Hopefully the rebuke from OSHA and bad press PC is getting will spur them to include more redundancy in their emergency protocols and power backup systems for vital safety equipment like hazardous emission scrubbers.

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**iamlucky13**

October 19, 2011 at 4:50PM

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Total amount of hazardous material on-hand is much less in this case, especially the amount in the ovens.

Also the level of hazard of the substances involved is very small. This wasn't a huge pesticide spill in a river, or a release of large amounts of radioactive material. It was nitrogen dioxide that is produced as a result of the coating process and drawn through chemical scrubbers by ventilation fans. Nitrogen dioxide is a mild toxin and lung irritant most famously known as a component of smog. In modern car engines it's controlled by the catalytic converter.

From reading the citation, the concern OSHA has that led them to cite and fine PCC is not that they released a hazardous amount of it. Rather, it's that two workers who didn't have hazardous environment training went into the area without first checking the levels of of nitrogen dioxide inside the building or donning respirators. They had no exposure symptoms.

Likewise, neighbors were told to remain indoors because the fire department was unsure of the possible magnitude of the hazard, not because there actually was a substantial hazard.

In general it sounds like PCC responded pretty well - Identifying a chemical hazard, notifying the authorities, attempting to restore power to the circulation system, etc. A few mistakes were made, but no one was hurt, and PCC cooperated with OSHA to address the mistakes to reduce the chances of this happening in the future.

Unfortunately, too many people seem eager to crucify a big business for even the smallest mistakes.

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**philliephanatic**

October 19, 2011 at 5:13PM

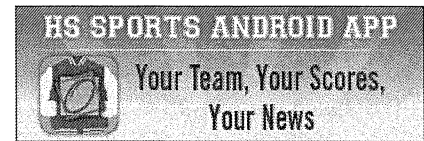
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I have to agree. I don't know near enough about the materials that are routinely handled at PC to suggest that a serious accident along the lines of Bhopal or Fukushima is a possibility there. Hazardous materials are all around us and we rightly expect them to be managed and disposed of safely. The greater the risk posed by these materials, the greater the responsibility of the businesses who utilize them, but I have not seen evidence yet that the PC accident posed a substantial threat to human health or environmental receptors that would warrant severe fines or require them to heavily invest in new controls. I suspect they already tightened up procedures after all the negative press they received.

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**madcarpenter**

October 20, 2011 at 7:15PM

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I'm not trying to crucify one of our only Fortune 500 companies in Oregon.

But the possibility exists, that a large industrial plant which uses volatile, flammable, potentially toxic chemicals in the production of molten hot metal castings might face a potentially out of control emergency should a long awaited 9.0 earthquake strike the the city where it is located, and disrupt the electrical grid.

In light of recent disasters associated with other industrial giants who had their supposedly fail-safe, doubly redundant backup systems compromised by Mother Nature, I don't think it's 'crying wolf' to express concern for the thousands of residents who live near Precision Castparts Johnson Creek production plant.

Better safe than sorry. Ask some Japanese neighbors of Fukushima Daichi.

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October 20, 2011 at 7:48AM

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Sure hope that this chemically toxic cloud didn't harm any wildlife.
Anyone check to see if any fish or birds were adversely affected downwind by the release of these life threatening compounds into the jet stream?

[Reply](#)[Post new](#)[Inappropriate? Alert us.](#)**oldzeb**

October 20, 2011 at 6:56PM

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...and which "life threatening compounds" are you speaking of?

The ones the firefighters could not detect and had neither symptoms or adverse effects from?

There is no excuse for having any noxious or irritating material being inadvertently released from a facility through sub-optimal engineering and plant design but this event was much less risky than any plating or finishing shop in Stumptown. Yes, it was a smoking gun, but it was a pea shooter. (Yes, you *could* put someone's eye out with one of those as well.)

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